DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 535 PS 023 980

AUTHOR Parker, Judith
TITLE Understanding Grief & Loss.
INSTITUTION Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Watson.
REPORT NO ISBN-1-875890-14-9; ISSN-1320-2170
PUB DATE Dec 95
NOTE 21p.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Early Childhood Association, P.O. Box 105, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia (4 issues yearly, $34 Australian dollars, includes surface mail postage).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT AECA Resource Book Series; v2 n4 Dec 1995

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Affective Behavior; Books; Caregiver Role; *Childhood Needs; Children; Childrens Literature; *Coping; Cultural Awareness; *Death; Early Childhood Education; Emotional Adjustment; Emotional Response; Foreign Countries; *Grief
IDENTIFIERS *Bereavement; *Loss

ABSTRACT

Although death is the one certainty in life, death or the grieving process is rarely discussed. Grief includes physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological reactions to loss, and is not limited to feelings about death. Grief can be the response to loss of home or country, separation or displacement, and changes resulting from new life stages. This issue of the ACEA Resource series gives practical information for Australian early childhood workers in helping children cope with grief, death, and loss. Definitions are given for loss, grief, and bereavement. Topics covered include: (1) the adult perspective; (2) the child's perspective; (3) how to talk to a child about death; (4) predictable and normal reactions to death; (5) the death of a sibling; (6) the chronically ill child; (7) the loss of a pet; (8) cultural influences on grief, asserting the importance of understanding different traditions associated with loss and grief; (9) the early childhood educator's responsibilities, including recognizing feelings, explaining clearly what has happened, monitoring vulnerable children and adults, and establishing an ongoing program that acknowledges the need to grieve; and (10) books for children dealing with loss, death, and grief. Contains 17 references. (BGC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

AECA Resource Book Series
Volume 2 – Number 4 December 1995

Unders[illegible]

ED 392 535

PS 023980

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Judith Parker

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kevin Hoare
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Invitation to Authors

The AECA Resource Book Series is published four times each year by the Australian Early Childhood Association.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children. Booklets produced in previous years have now become standard texts in many early childhood courses.

The Resource Book Committee invites contributions on all aspects of the education and care of young children. Given the multi-disciplinary nature of the field, contributions from all disciplines concerned with young children and their families are welcome.

All Resource Book manuscripts are required to undergo a blind review by readers experienced in the field and will not necessarily be published. The style of the Resource Books must be simple and informative. Jargon and the presumption of prior knowledge should be avoided. Guidelines for contributors are available on request from the Publications Section.

Resource Book Committee

Jane Smyth (Chair)
Marilyn Fleer
Liza Carroll
Careen Leslie
Dawn Sword
Therezia Mihajlovic
Robyn Bryant
Kath Onstenk
Bryony Flavell

AECA Publications Manager
Kevin Hoare

Publications Officers
Louise Tigchelaar & Lyndon Lovell

Publications Assistant
Kathryn Fowler

1996 Subscriptions
Yearly (4 issues) $30 including postage.

Overseas Subscriptions
$34 including surface mail postage (Australian dollars).

Bulk Subscriptions
Special rates available for bulk purchases. Contact AECA for details.

Change of Address
Please advise promptly. Send both your new and old address to AECA.

Advertising Rates
Call AECA Publications Section for details.

Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
PO Box 105, Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (06) 241 6900 Fax: (06) 241 5547

© Copyright 1995
All rights reserved by the Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. Material herein must not be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the Association.

Registered for posting as a publication — PP232100/00036

ISSN 1320-2170
ISBN 1 875890 14 9

Printed by Goanna Print, Canberra

Understanding
Grief & Loss

Understanding grief and loss 1

The adult perspective: recognising the normality of grief 1

The child's perspective: helping the child to understand 3

Death 6

Predictable and normal reactions of a child to a loss through death 7

When a sibling dies 9

The chronically ill child 10

Loss of a pet 10

Cultural influences on grief 11

The responsibility of the early childhood educator 11

Books for children 14

Bibliography 14

About the author: Judith Parker is an early childhood educator/counsellor specialising in grief and loss counselling. Her qualifications are Early Childhood (Melbourne University), Post Graduate Diploma in Special Education with a Major in Learning Disabilities (Canberra University), and a Post Graduate Diploma in Community Counselling with Majors in Family Therapy and Grief and Loss Counselling (Canberra University). She worked as an early childhood teacher in Canberra for 32 years and has had a long involvement in executive positions. She is an advocate for children's rights through AECA, the Canberra Preschool Society, Speld, and OMEP. She is also a member of the National Association for Loss and Grief.

All examples quoted in this book are from true life experiences—names and places have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Photographs: Louise Tigchelaar/Kathryn Fowler
With thanks to the staff and children at the Black Mountain Child Care Centre, Jenny Fowler & Jessie Boyd.

A companion to this book, *Understanding Separation & Divorce*, will be published as Resource Book Vol. 3 - No. 1 March 1996 No. 1 March 1996.

The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) is a national peak non-government organisation acting in the interests of young children aged 0-8, and for older children in outside school hours care.

AECA actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children and their families and supports the important role of parents in caring for their children.

AECA values its important role as the national umbrella organisation for Children's Services. AECA sees this task as supporting the advocacy role of the child care sector as a whole, without undermining the rights of each specialist organisation to operate and speak independently.

AECA is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature. As well as producing the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, Every Child *magazine, the* AECA Resource Book Series, *newsletter and special titles, AECA markets books and videos on early childhood topics from other companies and organisations.*

For a copy of AECA's Resource Catalogue ring (06) 241 6900.

Understanding grief and loss

We live in a world of uncertainty. We face continual changes of governments, policies, jobs, and relationships. Wars and natural disasters can change our lives forever. The one certainty in life is death, yet we rarely discuss dying and the grief process which follows. Perhaps we feel it is safer to deny our mortality. But the denial of the reality of death may result in ourselves and our families—and our children in particular—being unprepared for the emotionally disruptive experience.

Grief is not only related to death but also to a loss of home, country, family, friends; separation or displacement; moving to a new job, school, or community; loss of a pet; growing up, growing old; or the change resulting from a new stage of life. By exploring the process we begin to understand the necessity of grief. Coping strategies can provide both adults and children with support mechanisms.

As adults we have a responsibility to help children understand death and loss. We must confront our own fears and lack of knowledge of the grief process before we are in a position to support children through loss.

Definitions

- **Loss.** The actual event of losing something or a person, e.g. through separation or death.
- **Grief.** Describes physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological reactions. Love, anger, fear, frustration, loneliness, and guilt are all part of the grief process.
- **Bereavement.** The period of adjustment to loss.

The adult perspective: recognising the normality of grief

We all experience loss. We grieve through a period of critical illness, loss of a relationship or lifestyle, and retirement; and after a death, divorce, separation, or abortion. Grief is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith. It is an individual response which will vary according to the person, the circumstances of the loss, and past experiences. Each person's grief is unique.

As adults we have a responsibility to help children understand death and loss.

In our society others often become upset through demonstrations of emotional, physical, social and cognitive reactions, e.g. crying. The period of tolerance is short; adults will quickly encourage a person to "forget and get on with life"

Example: John, a four-year-old who had attended the centre, died after being burnt in a house fire. The day after John's funeral, Peter, who had worked as the centre gardener for some years, stood in the garden and cried. The early childhood worker on playground duty approached him and said, "Peter, I don't think you should cry in front of the children. It would be best if we all just got on with what we have to do."

Peter completed his work but resigned the next week. One of the children commented, "Peter is sad because John died."

All the staff should have been involved in discussions concerning John's death. The staff member who found Peter crying could have talked quietly with him, acknowledging Peter's grief. Peter could later have been encouraged to put in some special plants at the centre in remembrance of John.

Death is a significant loss. At the time of death there is a sense of shock.

Immediate reactions are:

- sudden intake of breath;
- quickening heart beat;
- difficulty breathing, followed by fast breathing;
- dry mouth;
- weak limbs;
- "fluttering" feeling in stomach;
- intense crying;
- feeling of unreality.

An understanding of the concept of loss should begin before an actual crisis.

Later reactions are:

- crying;
- change of sleep patterns;
- lack of appetite, often followed by the need to eat at inappropriate times;
- difficulty in making decisions;
- a need to be with someone; may need to talk or be quiet;
- feeling of numbness, disassociation.

Expression of feelings is a normal and healthy part of the grief process. Grief lasts far longer than society recognises.

It is important to accept your grief. Give yourself time to think. Delay major decisions. Monitor your health. Guard against the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Share your pain with your friends.

In a work environment: Early childhood services staff need to ensure strategies are in place to enable members to share, communicate, and understand behaviour resulting from a severe loss.

The child's perspective: helping the child to understand

An understanding of the concept of loss should begin before an actual crisis. Parents and educators can use natural events to expose children to first-hand experiences, e.g. examining a dead bird found on a pathway provides an opportunity to point out the stillness, lack of heartbeat and breathing-the physical aspects of death.

Example: Joan discovered a dead bird in the centre garden. The children had often seen similar birds feeding and nesting, and had listened to their song. A group of children gathered around the dead bird, and Joan talked to them about how the bird's heart was no longer beating, and how it did not breathe. The children felt their own chests moving and listened to each other's heartbeats. Later the bird was buried in the garden, and the children often put flowers near the grave.

A child was heard to comment some weeks later, 'That's where the bird is now. It's dead; its heart doesn't beat.'

Another child commented, 'I can hear the birds; they fly around but not the dead one.'

Parents and educators can use natural events to expose children to first-hand experiences

Some weeks later Kevin (5) was told that his grandfather had died. His mother told him, 'Grandpa has died. He was an old man and his heart had become so tired and weak it stopped beating.'

Kevin: 'I knew a bird that had a heart that stopped. It was cold and still.'

Mother: 'Grandpa's body is like that now.'

Kevin: 'Will Grandpa be buried?'

Mother: 'Yes, and we will be able to visit his grave when we want to.'

Kevin commented, 'The bird has a grave,' and he ran off to play.

Kevin's previous experience at the centre enabled him to comprehend his mother's message. Note that the mother avoided comments such as 'Grandpa was sick and he died'. Kevin may have understood it to mean that death inevitably follows sickness.

A simple explanation of the truth is all the child requires, reinforced by assurance that they are loved.

Allow a child to observe your grief at the news of a loved one's death. Talk about your love for that person and how you will miss his/her friendship.

Children are continually exposed to loss situations: a pet is killed; a friend or teacher moves away; Grandpa dies; a neighbour's car is stolen. Each situation requires a particular strategy for helping the child to cope.

Example: Shirley, the toddler-room nurse, resigned. For several days Lisa (2) would look at every new person entering the room, and several times she said 'Shirley'. She looked in the store cupboard and called 'Shirley'. When her mother collected her she said, 'Shirley gone.'

Her mother said, 'I miss Shirley too. Kaye looks after you now.' She gave Lisa a photo of herself with Shirley.

The mother acknowledged Lisa's loss, stated her own loss, and also accepted the new carer. All this helped Lisa to work through the loss of a significant person in her life.

Example: Susie (6) became angry when relatives began going through her mother's clothes and jewellery. When her aunt tried on her mother's ring, Susie yelled, 'Take it off; it is my Mum's.' She snatched the jewellery box and ran out of the room. Her grandmother told her she was a naughty girl. Susie went outside, threw a rock at the window, and broke it.

Susie's mother had become ill two months previously and had been admitted to hospital. She told Susie to 'look after things' until she got back. When she died, the family decided to tell Susie only that 'Mummy is away.'

Being asked to 'look after things' places a big responsibility on a child. A child could be given one small responsibility on such an occasion, however, such as feeding the cat. The family should have kept Susie informed of her mother's illness and death. When the family divided her mother's possessions between them, they should have explained why.

It is appropriate for personal pieces of jewellery to be given to relatives, as a reminder of the deceased. It would have been helpful for Susie to have had a piece of her mother's jewellery or the jewellery box she was familiar with.

Example: The family cat was run over and killed. Megan (8) helped her father bury the cat, then came into the kitchen. She looked for the cat's bowl, and her mother told her, 'I put it away in the cupboard. Katie is dead.'

Megan found the bowl, filled it with water and placed it in the usual spot, saying 'That's where Katie's bowl goes.' Her mother gave her a hug and said, 'We will all miss Katie.'

The bowl stayed in the kitchen for two weeks, filled with water each day by Megan. Then she washed it and put it away, saying, 'I might have another cat one day.' The time was right for Megan to remove the memories of Katie. Directly after the death was too soon.

A young child may not believe a loss is final.

Example: Grandma always came on the bus on Fridays to visit the family. Paul (3) had been told that Grandma had died and that she would never visit again. The day after, Paul saw the bus go past his house and ran outside calling, 'Grandma's coming.' 'No Paul,' said his mother, 'Grandma has died.'

'That was yesterday,' said Paul. 'Grandma is coming now.'

Paul's mother needed to accept the limits of his understanding of the concept of time.

An extreme loss is a family crisis. The child is part of the family, and should be included in discussions.

Example. The family sat talking about baby Alan, who had died a month before.

'I miss Alan so much, sometimes I think I hear him cry,' said Mother.

Father put his arm around her and said, 'I miss him too.' He included James (4) in the circle of his arms.

An adult close to a child should tell the child immediately about a family death

Death

The modern child is exposed to death through TV and films, yet the word 'death' remains taboo in everyday conversation. Most adults include children in the discussion of the birth process. However, few discuss death with children, even though it is just as natural a process.

An adult close to a child should tell the child immediately about a family death, using language appropriate to the child's level of development.

Example: Jane's mother died after a long illness. Jane's grandmother came to the care centre and took Jane into the quiet room and sat with her on her knee.

'Jane, Mummy has died. She now has no more pain. She cannot talk to us anymore; her body is still. We will always love her and remember her. I love her very much and I feel sad. We will go to be with your Daddy now. He is feeling sad and wants us to be with him.'

We need to include:

- the fact of the death;
- a clear statement concerning the reality of death;
- some information about the cause and circumstance of death;
- expression of feelings about the loss.

Example: 'Grandpa died last night. His body stopped working; he does not breathe any more and his heart does not beat. His body has been taken to the funeral home. I am going to the home now, and tomorrow all the family will go to a special service at church to say goodbye to Grandpa. I am feeling sad;I am going to miss him.'

It is important to give the child physical reassurance of your love,such as a hug and holding hands, as you relay the news. Some explanations of death confuse the child and create fear and guilt rather than understanding. 'Grandpa is in heaven' creates a concept the young child cannot comprehend. 'Grandpa died because he was sick' may cause fear for the child who develops a cold and is told he is 'sick'.

Young children base their understanding on the facts available. This understanding is reinforced by first-hand experiences. The factual statement is 'Grandpa died.' The extension of the statement is 'He does not breathe any more, his heart does not beat.' It is helpful to use language which relates to the child's experiences of death. The child who has observed the dead bird and discussed breathing and heartbeat will understand the lifeless body.

Adults understand that the death of a close relative affects the emotional life of all members of the family and that each person's grief is individual and needs to be addressed with sensitivity.

A child's grief differs from that of an adult in that the young child's world is in the here-and-now. Sadness is short-lived. The adult is able to share the child's world of loss by being prepared to listen, observe play, and support creative work. Children have their own way of explaining the death of someone special.

Example: The week after her grandmother's death, Kate (4) told her friends at the centre, 'Grandmother is coming to my birthday party.'

An adult said, 'Your grandmother has died; she can't come to your party.'

Kate replied, 'She's not dead now; she will come.'

Some months later Kate was playing in the home corner with two friends. She pushed Susan out. 'You died and you never, never come back.' She pretended to arrange a party for her other friend and the toys. She cuddled a doll. 'Grandmother is dead,' she said. She kissed the doll.

Kate initially had difficulty understanding that death was final. But her mother had consistently emphasised that death was not temporary: 'Grandmother will not be at your party; she is dead,' and 'I miss Grandmother; I wish I could talk to her, but I can't because she is dead. I can only remember her.'

Her mother's consistency helped Kate understand that death is real. Children must be part of the love, grief, anger and despair of their significant adults. Adults must communicate with them and share the experience.

Example: John's friend had been killed. He was shocked. 'I've lost my friend,' he cried as he told his family he felt so alone. John's son, William (7), held his hand and said, 'I'm here, Dad.'

William did not really understand his father's loss. However, with a child's honesty, he said what his father needed to hear. The family still had each other. The loss experience was shared with William; he learned it was all right to share intense emotions with his family.

Predictable and normal reactions of a child to a loss through death

Under two years. The child is aware of separation and feelings of loss. Detailed explanations are unnecessary. The child responds to cuddling and talk about familiar things. Children of this age sense changes of mood. Adults need to communicate warmth, reassurance, and support.

Strategies: Supply their immediate needs of—and make repeated assurances of—love and security. Keep to familiar patterns.

Example: Jill (18 months) attended full day care during her mother's brief illness. At the time of her mother's death relatives staying at her home delivered her to, and collected her from, the centre. Jill was confused and insecure. The centre staff arranged for a staff member to whom Jill related to be on duty at the times Jill was there. The staff member paid particular attention to Jill. Gradually Jill became more settled.

Preschoolers: 2–4 years. Death is understood as temporary; the child cannot conceive its finality. Children of this age are concerned about what is happening to their world, e.g. 'Will

Daddy die too?' The loss of a significant adult may cause them to feel insecure. They will need repeated reassurances that their world will remain relatively unchanged, such as 'I am here, I love you', or 'I will come to pick you up after story time'.

Strategies: Reiterate simple explanations concerning the death, such as 'Grandmother died'. Give reassurances of love and protection. Maintain the everyday lifestyle pattern. Provide opportunities for creative expression of emotions.

4–6 years. Children of this age may accept the death in a matter-of-fact way.

Example: The staff of the child care centre were told that Bethany's father had been killed in a car accident the day before. Bethany's grandfather delivered her to the centre, and she arrived as the children were telling news.

She announced, 'I came in Grandpa's car. My daddy smashed his car and it won't go any more. Daddy died and there is going to be a funeral. Grandpa's car is nicer than Daddy's; it's red.'

The teacher put her arm around Bethany and said, 'I am sad your Daddy died. I will miss him. I am glad your Grandpa could bring you to be with us today.'

Another staff member, Jodie, took the grandfather into the staff room, extended the condolences of the staff, assured him of their support, and sat with him as he talked.

Later Jodie sat near Bethany as she worked on a puzzle and said, ' I heard that your father died. I feel sad and I cried a little when I was talking to your grandfather. He is sad too.'

Bethany said, 'My Grandma feels sad too.' She continued to work on her puzzle.

Jodie put her arm around Bethany and sat quietly beside her. Bethany smiled at her. Each gave the other permission to grieve, and Jodie gave Bethany reassurance her 'world' at the centre was unchanged.

Strategies: It is important for the child to observe the behaviour of grieving adults. Use clear statements such as 'I am sad because my dog died this morning.' Be honest about your feelings.

6–9 years. The child realises that death is final. Children require more information at this age, but be careful not to overload them with too much detail. The child will be curious about the funeral, cemeteries, and rituals. Older children have established meaningful relationships with other people, and comprehend beyond immediate experiences. It is important to reassure them of their future, their security, and your love.

Strategies: Give clear explanations. Ensure communication between parents, child, and new staff. Enable the child to release emotion through extensive use of creative outlets.

9–12 years. The child has developed an understanding of death. Their concepts are based on biological information. This can be frightening as they struggle with feelings of fragility. The child may have difficulty concentrating, school work may decline, and they may appear

angry and sad. It is important for the family to include them in the experience and the decision-making. They need a role, a purpose, to assure them of their worth and their security.

Strategies: Provide information and continued assurance of love and security. Include the child in decision-making.

When a sibling dies

This is a time of extreme family crisis. Parents feel helpless and disturbed. Other children in the family are often afraid that they, too, may die. They are coping with the loss of a brother or sister as well as changed behaviour of parents. They will sometimes try to replace the lost child by changing behaviour.

Example: Michael's sister had died four months ago. He developed eating problems which his mother discussed with the care centre director. It became apparent that Michael was demanding the same eating pattern his sister had needed during her illness. The mother realised she had devoted little time to Michael since his sister's death, and he was trying to gain her attention.

Surviving children often feel guilty when a sibling dies. This is a time of extreme family crisis.

Strategy. The centre staff encouraged the mother to spend more time with Michael at the centre. A consistent family eating pattern was established, incorporating Michael's favourite foods.

Surviving children often feel guilty; they remember sibling fights. They have lost a playmate and friend they loved but who was also a rival in the family. If the sibling had been ill for a long period the surviving child may have received little attention, and may now demand it.

Parents need to reassure the child he/she does not have the same disease which caused the sibling's death, that he/she is strong and healthy. Parents need to be patient and loving. While the remaining child is an individual and will never replace the child who died, the family is still there and the remaining child is part of the family.

Example: Sam said the packed lunches he brought to the centre were not what he liked. One day he threw the lunch box on the floor.

'Tim likes that,' he yelled. (His older brother Tim had died three months before.)

When the situation was discussed with the parents it was realised that the mother had been using Tim's lunch box for Sam and packing the lunches that Tim had liked. She asked Sam what he would like, and he helped choose a new lunch box. The lunchtime eating problems were over.

The chronically ill child

A chronic illness may be terminal and have periods of remission. Some treatments cause physical changes, e.g. loss of hair, fatigue, and nausea. External changes may cause rejection or teasing by peers.

Children with chronic illnesses face emotional upheaval and fears. Most of their energy is spent coping with their illness. The child grieves for lost friends and freedom, and tries to cope with separation from family during hospitalisation. Parents grieve for the lost childhood and suffer feelings of guilt, frustration, anger, and exhaustion. Communication is important between the family, health workers, and all those who educate and care for the child.

If the child dies, feelings of loss will be mixed with feelings of relief that the child's suffering is over. It is important that the family and all those involved with the child can express their grief and loss. A memorial service provides an opportunity for those who have cared for the child to say goodbye.

Strategies: Communication between centre staff, medical staff, family, and sick child is paramount.

Loss of a pet

The loss of a pet can be traumatic for a child. Never trivialise a pet's death. If a pet's death is imminent (e.g. an aged or ill animal), discuss it in advance. Allow the child time to say goodbye. Explain the death in simple, factual terms. Involve the child in the burial of the pet, or arrange a family ceremony to mark the death. Encourage the child to remember positive, happy things about the pet as well as acknowledging the sadness of the loss. Later make a story with the child, including pictures. Allow time to grieve before replacing the pet.

Example: The children arrived at the centre to find that the pet rabbit had died. The children were encouraged to feel the dead rabbit and discuss its physical changes. The children and staff found a place to bury the rabbit, and the gardener helped the children to dig a hole. Everyone talked about the rabbit as it was in life; how it ate grass, its eyes twinkled, its tail bobbed.

The rabbit was placed in a box and buried. The children placed flowers on the grave, and the director said a prayer. The children made a cross to put on the grave. The ceremony allowed adults and children to grieve together as well as enabling the children to experience the rituals of death.

Cultural influences on grief

All societies pay special attention to important events. Many groups follow traditions associated with loss and grief which are unique to their culture. It is important that these traditions are understood, and allowances made to allow individuals to grieve according to their needs.

Strategies: Staff should discuss their knowledge of custom and rituals concerning death in various cultures. The children should be given simple explanations about different customs.

Some families follow all the traditions of their culture; others follow ideas from another culture, and in this way new patterns are formed.

Example: The children were making paintings of their families. Gina, whose family is Greek, asked for black paint because she wanted to paint her godmother who 'always wears black 'cause her husband has died.'

The responsibility of the early childhood educator

Many early childhood workers and educators feel uncomfortable dealing with topics such as death, and avoid them until circumstances force the topic to be addressed. The time to work out strategies for coping with a crisis of loss is now:

Recognise your own feelings. Feelings associated with your own experiences involving major loss or change will surface at another time of crisis. Allow yourself to grieve, and share the experience with a colleague or friend.

Explain clearly what has happened. First speak to those directly involved. In the case of the death of a child this will be those who worked with the child each day and the students in the child's class. All people involved in the situation must be informed. You may find that the person who helped the child across the school crossing each morning is deeply affected by the child's death.

Monitor vulnerable children and adults. Watch for verbal and non-verbal messages which indicate distress, and offer your support.

Example: A child was hit by a car near the centre and a parent insisted that all the children should be drilled in road safety every day. A staff member discovered that this parent's child had been killed in a similar accident several years previously, and she felt guilty that she had not taught the child road safety. The staff planned activities to facilitate safety learning. The parent was encouraged to access suitable grief counselling. Later she became involved in a community road safety program.

Address fear and fantasies. Observe and listen. Reassure.

Example: Dan's father delivered him to the centre and said he was late for work. Dan ran after him crying 'Daddy, where's my library bag?'.

'Don't know mate; find it later for tomorrow,' said his father frantically, and left quickly. Dan's mother is terminally ill, and his father is coping with the family, his job, and hospital visiting.

An early childhood worker took Dan's hand, saying, 'Today is the day for you to borrow a book, and I have a special bag here for you to put it in. Then we will hang it on your hook to take home when Dad picks you up.'

Dan was given the reassurance that Dad would collect him, that he could borrow a book, and that there was a bag to put it in. The worker swiftly put Dan's 'immediate world' in order.

Provide an environment where it is safe to grieve. Let students and staff know it is all right to cry. Provide a quiet place where a staff member or child can sit if they need time to themselves. Other staff may need to assume some of the grieving staff member's duties.

Example: Peter (4) returned to the centre after his twin brother's death. He seemed to want to play alone in the sand pit. The early childhood worker encouraged the group of children to build castles, leaving Peter to dig alone. Later she moved to sit near him. She smiled but did not talk to him. Peter moved close to her. She cuddled him and said, 'I miss John.' Peter did not speak but cuddled close to her for several minutes. Peter played alone for several days and then began to play with the other children.

The early childhood worker was sensitive to Peter's needs. He needed time to adjust to the changes and the grief.

Example: Julie, the nurse, returned to work after her husband's death. She asked if someone else could check the children in and out of the room for the first few days as she felt she could not cope with the parents' sympathy. On the fourth day Julie felt strong enough to greet the children and parents.

Remember: If the crisis is a death, find some way to celebrate and remember the life. At an appropriate time consult with the family and be sensitive to their wishes.

Example: Judy was treasurer of the centre's committee. Her son (4) attended the centre. She was diagnosed with cancer and died within weeks. It was decided that there should be a memorial to Judy.

One morning the director sat with a group of children, including Judy's son Glen, and said, 'I have been thinking about Judy. I am sad that she died and I miss her. I would like to have something here that helps me remember her. What did she like to do?'

Glen immediately said, 'Mummy likes flowers; she smells them.'

The memorial was obvious: a garden. The garden was developed by the staff and children and Judy's husband. Plants included daphne, boronia, cologne mint, and thyme.

Judy's garden has continued to flourish. Glen visited the centre when he was nine. He told his friend, 'That's my mum's garden.'

His friend replied, 'Your mum died, didn't she?'

'Yes,' said Glen, 'But it's my mum's garden.'

Establish an ongoing program which acknowledges the need to grieve. It is important that children are encouraged to express grief through music, drama, art, and language.

The early educator needs to be:

Aware—to remember grief is normal and necessary;

There—the child needs consistency of relationships;

Sensitive—to allow and understand the pain, not deny it;

Ready—prepared for crisis and ready to listen to the stories of those who grieve;

Patient—the process of grief takes time. Love and support will ease the process.

Children believe in the here-and-now. We need to allow time and provide the means by which children are able to grieve for the past and their loss and move on.

James' (5) drawing of his friend's dad who had died

Books for children

Buscaglia, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*. Charles B. Slack.
Ellis, *When Olly's Grandad Died*. Hodden & Stoughton.
Kirkwood, *A Child's Questions About Death*. The Baptist Chaplaincy Care Service.
Lee, *The Magic Moth*. Seasbury Press.
McDonald, *Lemmie the Leaf*. Access Press.
Smith, *A Taste of Blackberries*. Heinemann.
Viorst, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*. Collins.
Walker, *To Hell With Dying*. Hodden & Stoughton.
White, *Charlotte's Web*. Harper.

Bibliography

Bernham, L. B. (1982) *The Caring Family. Living with Chronic 'Mental' Illness*. New York: Random House.

Bordow, J. (1982) *The Ultimate Loss. Coping with the Death of a Child*. New York: Beaufort Books Inc.

Carroll, D. (1985) *Living with Dying*. Mc Graw Hill Book Company.

Courtenay, B. (1994) *April Fools Day*. Melbourne: Mandarin.

Dolan, M.J. (1992) *How to Care for Your Aged Parents*. Los Angeles: Mulholland Pacific.

Health Department of Western Australia (1994) Dying with dignity: Draft interim guidelines on management. WA: Health Department of Western Australia.

Edwards, H. (1992) *I Thought I was the Only One Coping with Grief and Loss in Schools. A Resource for Teachers*. Victoria: Collins Dove.

Fox, S.S. (1988) *Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children when a Friend Dies*. Washington: The New England Publishing Company.

Grollman, E.A. (1990) *Talking about Death*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hawkes, V., Pawsey, M. & Shepherson, J. (1988) *Birth, Death and Marriage in Multicultural Australia*. Melbourne: Collins Dove.

Hockley, R. E. (1985) The precipitants of grief. Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference. National Association for Loss and Grief in Australia. September.

ACT Community and Health Service (1988) *Information for Teachers of Chronically Ill Children*. ACT Health Advancement Services.

Jackson, E. N. (1965) *Telling a Child about Death*. NY: Hawthorn Books Inc.

Jones, W. (1990) *Miscarriage: Overcoming the Physical and Emotional Trauma*. UK: Thorsons Publishing Group.

Townsend, P. (1980) *The Smallest Pawns in the Game*. London: Granada.

Wells, R. (1988) *Helping Children Cope With Grief*. London: Sheldon Press.

Worden, J. W. (1983) *Grief Counselling and Therapy*. London: Tavistock.

Guidelines for Contributors

Authors interested in writing for the AECA Resource Book Series or any other AECA publication should contact the Publications Section of the Australian Early Childhood Association for further information on the preparation of manuscripts and for a copy of the Guidelines for Contributors.

Publication Section
Australian Early Childhood Association
PO Box 105, Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (06) 241 6900 Fax: (06) 241 5547

Other Subscription Publications 1996

Every Child Magazine

Every Child Magazine is published four times a year especially for early childhood educators, carers and parents of children from 0–8 years of age. It provides news and features of interest to everyone working with, and interested in the education, care and development of young children.

$35
Overseas Aust. $40
includes postage

Australian Journal of Early Childhood

This journal comes out four times per year. It features up to date articles designed to impart new information and encourage the critical exchange of ideas among practitioners in the early childhood field. AJEC gives the field an indispensable Australian perspective on issues of concern and interest.

$40
Overseas Aust. $45
includes postage

Australian Early Childhood Newsletter

There will be six issues of the newsletter in 1995. The newsletter is produced by National Office staff and is a way of keeping the field informed of developments and issues as they occur. Over recent years particular attention has been paid to political events and government policy changes. With so much happening it is likely that 1995 issues will continue this focus.

$20
Overseas Aust. $23
includes postage

Bulk Rates are available to organisations ordering more than 20 copies of any one item. Contact AECA for details.

For subscription inquiries contact:

AECA Subscriptions
PO Box 105, Watson ACT 2602, Australia
Tel: (06) 241 6900 Fax: (06) 241 5547

AECA Resource Book Series
Australian Early Childhood Association
PO Box 105, Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (06) 241 6900 Fax: (06) 241 5547